

Children's Learning and the Development of Literacy Skills through a Structured Play Area

Judith Salter,

Synopsis:

Keywords:

The birth of the Play Zone

Over the last few years, since the introduction of the 5-14 Curriculum, teachers have been faced with a curriculum which has become increasingly narrow and prescriptive. With the development of 'Curriculum for Excellence', more emphasis seems to be placed on the benefits of experiential learning, much of which in my own setting at Mill O' Forest Primary School is provided by play activities.

So, about three years ago, two colleagues, Marjorie Hamilton and Kirsty Wood, and I were fortunate to be asked by then Head Teacher, Janice Stewart, to develop this idea further within the Early Years area. Initially it was thought that the provision of a structured play area shared between several classes would be a way of covering the Environmental Studies part of the infant curriculum, thus allowing teachers to concentrate more time on the teaching of literacy and numeracy within the classroom.

As the school is open plan, we were lucky in the Early Stages area to have access to a large shared space with alcoves and work surfaces suitable for the variety of activities we intended to supply. We were allowed to let our imaginations run riot! My colleagues and I felt that one of the most important aspects of play to provide for our pupils from Primary 1 to Primary 3 would be opportunities for imaginative play, hence we now have several role-play areas which over the last three years have become, amongst other things, a house corner, a shop, a woodland hiding place, an oilrig and supply boat, and a garden centre.

A carpeted area allows pupils to take part in activities on the floor, such as construction, large floor games and jigsaws, as well as various small world activities such as car mat, train set and doll's house. A wet area provides space for painting, sand, water and malleable activities. Thus our Play Zone was born. We were also lucky to be able to delegate a member of the classroom assistant staff to be available full-time to interact with pupils in the Play Zone.

Of course, many of these experiences have long been available within Early Stage classrooms, and within my own classroom, play has always been very important, especially socio-dramatic experiences. However, here we were providing a planned, structured play area which would be shared by pupils of varying ages who are able to work together and learn from each other. We have been keen to provide pupils with a purpose for play, so we use the Environmental Studies curriculum to plan the play experiences.

Our pupils are able to access the play area throughout the day, enabling them to engage with a variety of ages and abilities. Older pupils act as role models within the Play Zone. As well as this daily access, there is a weekly opportunity for the pupils from each class to play in the Play Zone with their teacher present. This period usually takes place first thing in the morning for approximately half an hour. This time enables the teaching staff to interact with and observe pupils at play.

The first year of the Play Zone proved to be a big success, and we had visits from teachers from other schools who were interested in the provision of play. It was at this point that my colleagues and I decided to evaluate the project. Having a particular interest in the development of literacy, I myself felt the play area could provide more opportunities for us to plan activities which would lead to 'raising the status of talk and communication; ensuring that any language use, spoken or written, is appropriate for its purpose and situation; drawing children's attention to print everywhere and making print exciting,' important factors in developing literacy in the early years according to Whitehead (1999: 13-14). As the play area became an integral part of school life, my colleagues and I did begin to notice an increased enthusiasm for writing from our young pupils.

Embarking on an Action Research study

In 2007 a colleague drew my attention to a poster about the Scottish Teachers for a New Era (STNE) scholarship. Throughout my teaching career, I have been keen to evaluate and change my practice, to provide an interesting and exciting school experience for my pupils. Thus, I have tried to read widely and try out new ideas. I have also been interested in collecting data to use to check that my practice is actually successful. The STNE Action Research scheme seemed to be a way of providing me with a supported opportunity to do that. So I signed up!

I enjoyed the introductory seminar, and felt inspired to enter into action research within my own setting. I began by making contact with my mentor, Laura, who seemed as excited as I to find out what impact play has on the development of a child's learning. She helped me to focus my research, by asking me to develop a research question, this being: **Could the provision of active learning experiences impact on a pupil's enthusiasm and ability to write independently?**

The hardest part for me, after deciding what my research question would be, was how I would collect evidence. My research question seemed to cover quite a broad subject, but by dividing it into sub-questions, I could see the types of data which would be useful.

During the previous year I had introduced my pupils to a Play Zone Diary. This originally took the form of a class diary. I had initially intended this to be used as a means of enabling pupils to make observations and evaluations of their own learning. This was as a result of my own worries about providing written evidence of the value of play, especially in these times of evidence led recording. In February 2008, I decided to give each pupil a jotter with space for writing and drawing. Pupils were encouraged to decorate their jotters as they wished. These diaries became personal accounts of pupils' formal learning of writing and the use of language within it. From this time onwards, I was able to use the pupils' diaries as measurable evidence of independent writing.

Further, I decided that if these diaries could be accessed voluntarily, this would provide evidence for the enthusiasm with which pupils were able to transfer their learning from one area of the curriculum to another; something which is central to the 'Curriculum for Excellence'.

Of course, I needed a baseline from which to begin my research, so I presented my pupils with a questionnaire about what they liked to do within the play area. Laura had helped me to decide upon a case study group from the Primary 1/2 class I taught. I have always been particularly interested in motivating especially young pupils in their first school experiences, so it seemed appropriate to focus on some pupils who were 4 years old when they entered school.

In my own experience, writing is one of those areas of the curriculum which may hold terrors for some pupils (boys in particular), with many seeing it as a chore to be undertaken with little enthusiasm. There is so much for them to think about when asked to produce a good piece of written work – the physical action of the writing process, sequencing of the words to make sense, the correct spelling of words, etc. Any activity which lessens that fear, or increases enthusiasm for writing must be beneficial.

Having taught in Brazil and Norway, I was also interested in those pupils whose first language was not English. So my case study group was selected, a combination of boys and girls from Primary 1.

Naturally, taking part in any type of research involves being aware of the ethical issues which may be raised by the project. I was aware that my action research was going to be taking place during my daily work time, thus involving colleagues and pupils, so I sought the permission of my head teacher, who was happy to support me. I also sought the approval of my colleagues, and the pupils participating in the research. I told them of my desire to help them with their writing. As I was intending to use photographic and video evidence to support this research, it was vital that I also sought written permission from the parents of my case study group, all of whom happily gave their consent.

Although my case study group was quite small, I recognised that all the pupils in the Early Stages area would be able to access the activities I was intending to provide, so these activities had to take account of age and ability of all pupils. I also had to recognise the role that other members of staff play in planning and creating the play activities, so I informed them of my intentions. Throughout the research period, my colleagues supported me by gathering written and observational evidence which I could then use to triangulate my data. We also discussed any benefits I was becoming aware of at our planning meetings. As with any child-led learning, we often found that activities had to be added, altered or removed throughout the year to take account of pupils' developing needs and desires.

Collecting and interpreting the data

The next few months became a busy time of collecting, organising and analysing data. Data analysis proved to be the most difficult part of the research, as I was aware that in taking part in the field of educational research, I had a responsibility to make sure my research data was valid.

It was during this time that I discovered some of my data collection methods had flaws! I discovered several obstacles when video recording. I found I had recorded pupils saying "That's watching us!" and making faces to the camera. I also discovered how difficult it is to place the video recorder appropriately. Young children will not

necessarily play where the researcher is wishing them to, as I found to my cost when I watched a recording of an empty role-play area!

Although I was basing my research on the development of literacy, I also wished to look at pupils' cognitive and social learning within the Play Zone. Using the video recorder and my own observations provided evidence of this. An aside from this is my discovery by accident of the usefulness of using a video recorder to assess my own practice!

However my main focus for data collection was the examples of writing I collected from pupils, much of it coming from the Play Zone diaries and pieces written voluntarily within the Play Zone settings. The analysis of this data proved to be a mammoth task, but as I sifted through it, I was beginning to see that pupils' writing was beginning to develop. Where pupils had been reluctant to write for a routine class task, they were keen to write about their play experiences. They even used them to converse with me on a more personal level "*But some one was being noty but im not gown to tell you.*"

Pupils seemed more willing to write if there was a purpose. They wrote lists in the shop, designed seed packets for the garden centre, posters to advertise a concert. One child in the case study group even wrote a letter to 'the Elvs' asking them to keep the Play Zone tidy.

The more I looked at the data, the more I became convinced that by providing a purpose for writing, we as teachers were providing a great incentive for pupils to write. Not only was this motivation becoming apparent, but I was also beginning to see a development in the content of their writing. Pupils were keen to use their phonic knowledge, especially in their diaries. "*I pleyd at the junc teybl I made a modl.*" As the year went by, many pupils began to add further details in their diary entries, usually showing what Hall describes as 'knowledge about the 'who', 'when', 'why', 'where' and 'what' of literacy' (Hallet and Marsh, 1999:106). Some pupils even began to comment on their own learning "*we wer going to play hopscohc and we lrnd that we cood make ladrs.*"

By looking at the content of the play diaries, it was easy to see that pupils had ownership of the Play Zone, and saw it as a place not only for social interaction, but also as a place for learning, through self expression and intention: "*I learned hou to bild a house with a back garden theat chanjed into a swimming pool.*"

The play diaries were not only a way of assessing writing, but also of making observations about pupils' cognitive learning across the curriculum, and especially in their personal and social development, as many wrote about their friendships.

Conclusions

So having collected all the data, what conclusions could I draw? And what wider implications does this research project have for teachers in the classroom? According to Whitehead (2007:14), 'language development is a social process that thrives in warmly supportive and meaningful contexts.' But there is an underlying feeling in education that pupils have to achieve certain levels at particular times during their school life. This, I feel, places teachers in a difficult position. Do they provide

activities which allow pupils to develop literacy at their own pace, or do they 'teach' literacy through paper exercises which often bear no resemblance to real life?

I myself would like to be in a position where I can be guided by the interests of my pupils, but I sometimes find myself having to go back to paper and 'old-fashioned' exercises to make sure I am producing the evidence I am asked for. Hopefully, as 'Curriculum for Excellence' becomes embedded in our schools, this feeling will be reduced. But I find myself agreeing with Whitehead (2007:52), that in order for children to develop the reflective and abstract ways of thinking which are valued in the later years of formal education 'they need many opportunities to enjoy and investigate meaningful literacy.'

Taking part in this research project has certainly had an effect on my practice, for it reaffirmed for me the great benefits of providing interesting and exciting structured play activities in the Early Years. It has also illustrated the benefits of adding opportunities for literacy learning within socio-dramatic play areas and of providing pupils with a means to write about personal, relevant and purposeful experience.

At the beginning of this session in my Primary 1 class, I introduced a puppet who is keen to spend the weekend with pupils who write him a letter. These letters have developed from short attempts at putting phonic sounds together, to longer detailed writings of what he will be able to do. Hence, he has great difficulty deciding who to visit, as he has so many 'letters'.

My research into the benefits of providing real experiential learning will continue. I wonder, do the children know that they are learning across the curriculum, or are they just playing? **Surely not!**

References:

Scottish Executive (2007) *A Curriculum for Excellence, Building the Curriculum 2*
http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/Images/Building%20the%20Curriculum%202_tcm4-408069.pdf

Hallet, E. and Marsh, J., (1999) *Desirable Literacies, Approaches to language and literacy in the early years*, London: Paul Chapman Publishing

Whitehead, M. (2007) *Developing Language and Literacy with Young Children*, London: Paul Chapman Publishing